

Preacher: Jack Kapinga
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Reading: 1 Kings 18:1-18
Title: Elijah: God's Not Dead!

Introduction

You know it could be argued that this week's text is a bit of a dud.

I mean last week John preached on 1 Kings 17, an incredibly beautiful passage where the Lord was clearly at work, sustaining Elijah through a brook and ravens, and through a starving widow's never-ending food supply, and to top it off he even raised her son from the dead. And then next week Reuben's going to preach on the 2nd half of 1 Kings 18, an absolutely awesome passage where the Lord reveals his fearsome power on the stage of Mount Carmel.

But this week we have some verses where the Lord doesn't seem to be doing much. And as a result everything's getting worse. And the main character is this strange man called Obadiah, who's really an enigma. For while he seems to have had great faith, it's apparent that now he's full of fear.

So what will we do with these verses? Well I suggest 2 things. First let's try together to enter into the earthly situation, to feel just how tough things were, and how that may relate to our own society. And secondly, we'll take a step back, trying to grasp what's happening from a heavenly perspective, and consider how that might encourage us even today.

The Earthly Situation.

So we start with the earthly situation of that time, and there's a number of things to note.

First, let's remember what we saw 2 weeks ago at the end of chapter 16. It said "Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and ... did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him."

Imagine what that was like. You know that the Lord is the one true God, the one who created the world, the one who chose your ancestor Abraham, amazingly growing him into a mighty nation, the one who miraculously delivered your people out of slavery, bringing them into this promised land. But now your own king has turned away, rejecting the Lord, despising his love and grace, disobeying his will at every opportunity. And instead he's following his foreign wife into the worship of man-made idols, who supposedly control the provision of rain and fertility, and he's trying to get the whole nation to do the same.

But let's also remember the result. Chapter 17:1 says, "Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.'" And then he left. Because of their flagrant rebellion, the Lord punishes this nation harshly, disciplines them severely. And in so doing shows them that Baal and Asherah were useless, worthless, impotent. For the very thing they were meant to supply, he would withhold. And in doing so he calls his people back to himself.

And this was no hollow threat was it? For that brings us to our passage today. And we're told in verse 1 that "a long time" had passed, 3 years in fact. And we're told in verse 2 that "the famine was severe". And so as a result of this rebellion, everyone suffered.

But that raises the question, how would they respond to this call to repent? Well let's start with Jezebel. In verse 4, in an almost offhand comment it says, "While Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets". Now those words are easy to overlook, but have you really thought about them? The king's wife was no longer happy to just introduce her false religion, but she was now actively trying to wipe out any knowledge, worship or even memory of the Lord. She's shooting the messengers, murdering hundreds of those whom God had called to speak his truth.

It's the equivalent of trying to eradicate every copy of the Bible today. It's the equivalent of trying to silence every missionary, minister and church leader who preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this has been tried in various parts of this world at various times throughout history. And if we naively think it can't happen in our society, then we'd be sadly mistaken, for the writing's already on the wall.

So imagine what this was like. You're part of God's nation, under God's discipline, and now God's prophets are being killed in droves. Surely this is too much, even for Ahab. Surely now he'll wake up to himself and step in. But he doesn't. It's noticeable that Ahab, in his pathetic weakness, does nothing to restrain the murderous rampage of his wife. In fact he seems to be all in favour, as his own murderous aggression is revealed later in the passage. But let's not forget what Ahab was busying himself with instead.

For the whole middle section of our text is driven by this ridiculous expedition. You see Ahab summoned Obadiah and said, "Go through the land to all the springs and valleys. Maybe we can find some grass to keep the horses and mules alive so we will not have to kill any of our animals'. So they divided the land they were to cover, Ahab going in one direction and Obadiah in another." Just think about this. For a start, doesn't the king have more important things to do than go on this wild goose chase? Why are he and his palace administrator travelling the whole land looking for grass that may not even exist? Further still, why's he so worried about killing his horses and mules while he has no qualms about killing the Lord's prophets. And on top of that, why's he more concerned about feeding his starving animals than caring for his starving people?

But at an even more fundamental level, why's he taking matters into his own hands when all he needs to do is repent, and rain will come? It all points to the fact that Ahab, following Jezebel's lead, is running further and further from the living God and spiralling deeper and deeper into wickedness and sin. And so it must have been horrendous living in such times, especially as someone staying true to the Lord.

Your society is plunging into evil and depravity, turning to all manner of false gods, ignoring the obvious curse that it's living under, turning ever further from the Lord and his truth, totally unwilling to repent, devoting itself to finding its own solutions, and becoming ever more aggressive toward those are faithful. After years of sin and suffering it must have felt like the Lord was losing the battle, like his kingdom was crumbling, like he was being pushed out of the picture. It must have felt like God was dead.

My friends, it sounds a lot like our own society doesn't it? We may live in a country that once called itself Christian, and upheld Christian morals, and saw the value of the Bible and prayer and the Church, a country that certainly didn't persecute God's people in any serious way. But things are changing fast.

I don't need to tell you the multitude of ways that Australia is rebelling against God and plunging deeper into sin. There's the acceptance and celebration of every false religion under the sun, as well as the rise of a whole bunch of modern idols like atheism, materialism and environmentalism. Then there's the ever growing movement against the sanctity of life through increasing

acceptance of abortion at the beginning and euthanasia at the end. And also the attack on the sanctity of marriage and family and gender, through not only the acceptance but the active promotion of every form of sexual perversion, and the growing push to force such ideas upon our children.

More and more we're discovering there's only one position that won't be tolerated and that's the position of the Lord Jesus Christ and of those who are true to him. And so his truth is increasingly ignored and concepts like sin and repentance considered a joke.

As a result, we may not suffer physical drought or famine, but we're most certainly suffering spiritual drought and spiritual famine, and the evidence is everywhere. For even though we're among the richest nations on earth, our mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing are deteriorating at an alarming rate. But instead of turning back to God, we devote unlimited resources to finding man-made solutions, like better medication and education, better technology and psychology.

But now as Christians we're not only being ignored but shut down. To quote Pastor John, while we were once seen as weird, now we're considered dangerous. Or to use the title of Steve McAlpine's recent book, in society today we've become the bad guys. And as a result we're under attack. But perhaps you think that isn't true? I mean we live in a bit of a bubble down here in little old Tassie, in little old Launnie. So is it really that bad?

Well let me give you one example. In February this year the Victorian Parliament passed their Change or Suppression Practices Prohibition Bill. This Bill makes it a criminal offence to seek to change or suppress a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. According to the government's own website, the legislation "aims to ensure that Victorians are able to live their lives authentically with pride, and makes it clear that an individual's sexual orientation and gender identity are not broken and do not need to be fixed."

In other words it's become a criminal offence to suggest that certain things God has forbidden in his Word are actually undesirable, wrong or sinful. It's become a criminal offense to preach, teach, pray or even say in conversation that a person should change. And if you do you could face serious fines or up to 10 years in jail. This has enormous implications, not just for churches but for Christian schools, other organisations and even parents.

But could this happen in little old Tassie? Well the Tasmanian Law Reform Institute are currently investigating the very same legislation and the University of Tasmania is conducting an incredibly biased consultation in order to advise our State government. As Reuben said to me the other day, our futures could well include prison just for preaching God's Word. And so my friends, we too might feel like the Lord is losing the battle, like his kingdom is crumbling, like he's being pushed out of the picture. We too might feel that God is dead.

The Heavenly Perspective.

But is he? Well let's go back to our text and look at it from the heavenly perspective, from God's perspective. We should start by noticing Obadiah himself. Now I should mention that he isn't the prophet Obadiah, nor any of the other 10 men with that name in the Old Testament. This Obadiah is mentioned only here. And what are we told? Verse 3, "Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord." Now that's a strong commendation, very few are described like this. He was a sincere and righteous follower of God. And so despite the rebellion and idolatry and depravity all around him, despite the pressure he must have felt, God had preserved this man whose faith was firm. And God preserved him, not just anywhere, but in a powerful and influential position, as Ahab's "palace administrator".

And it was by virtue of this position that he'd "taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water." So despite the fact that Jezebel was murdering every prophet she could find, God used Obadiah to preserve 100, a faithful remnant, and despite the drought and famine, he supplied their needs for 3 years. And he must have done this at enormous risk to his own life. So God had given him courage beyond his own.

But friends, don't forget that God still preserves his faithful remnant today. Even though the Church is under pressure, there are still many devout believers in this country. And some are in prominent positions. It's no coincidence that our Prime Minister is a Christian, and his election truly was a miracle. It's no coincidence that there's 7 faithful believers in our Tasmanian parliament, who have a strong influence in many areas. And there's many others prominent in medicine, law, media, education, business, sport and so on. And that all reminds us that God is still at work.

But then there's also Obadiah's meeting with Elijah. Now in verse 1 we're told that God sent Elijah to see Ahab. And in verse 16 we're told that he did see Ahab. And so this whole interlude with Obadiah was unnecessary, but yet God wanted them to meet. Why? Well because Obadiah needed encouragement. I mentioned earlier that this was a ridiculous expedition. But yet the Lord used it to bring these 2 together. In verse 7 it says, "As Obadiah was walking along, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognised him, bowed down to the ground, and said, 'Is it really you, my lord Elijah?'" Not only was Obadiah a devout believer but he also had deep respect for the Lord's prophet. And so it says, "Yes," he replied. "Go tell your master, 'Elijah is here.'"

But then we see an unexpected response. From verse 9 it says, "'What have I done wrong,' asked Obadiah, 'that you are handing your servant over to Ahab to be put to death? As surely as the Lord your God lives, there is not a nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to look for you. And whenever a nation or kingdom claimed you were not there, he made them swear they could not find you. But now you tell me to go to my master and say, 'Elijah is here.' I don't know where the Spirit of the Lord may carry you when I leave you. If I go and tell Ahab and he doesn't find you, he will kill me. Yet I your servant have worshipped the Lord since my youth. Haven't you heard, my lord, what I did while Jezebel was killing the prophets of the Lord? I hid a hundred of the Lord's prophets in two caves, fifty in each, and supplied them with food and water. And now you tell me to go to my master and say, 'Elijah is here.' He will kill me!"

So what are we to make of all this? Obadiah was a devout believer, and he'd already risked his life to hide 100 prophets. But in this astonishingly long and impassioned speech he makes it abundantly clear that he's now absolutely terrified. He was afraid that if he told Ahab that Elijah was found, that Elijah would disappear. And he was also afraid that even if he didn't disappear, Ahab would presume he'd known his whereabouts all along. And so either way he was convinced Ahab would kill him, a fate he repeats no less than 3 times. Obadiah had gone from devout faith to debilitating fear. But why would that be?

Well it's because years had passed. And in that time Ahab, Jezebel and the whole nation had fallen ever deeper into sin, trying to wipe out any memory of the Lord and any remnant of his worshippers. And they seem to be succeeding. And so it seemed to Obadiah that the Lord was silent, the Lord was absent, the Lord was dead. And so he was afraid.

But let's be honest, doesn't that make him just like us? I mean we believe in the Lord Jesus don't we? We trust him for the very salvation of our souls! But yet when life gets tough, we can so easily become afraid. Which of us haven't fallen apart when a job is lost, or a marriage goes bust, or an illness diagnosed, or a loved one dies? We say we trust the Lord, but then something happens and we feel quickly like God has abandoned us.

And what about those things I mentioned earlier. Don't you ever despair about the way this country's heading, and the way Christianity's under attack? What if you were discriminated against for following Christ? What if you were accused of child abuse for raising your kids God's way? What if your business was boycotted because you don't support certain views? What if you were arrested for teaching the Bible to your class at school? What if you were imprisoned for proclaiming the gospel, just like I am right now? Don't you ever fear what lies ahead for ourselves, our children and grandchildren. I know that I do! And that's because we can start to doubt and wonder what God's doing? Is he still at work, is he still on our side, is he still in control? This nation's working hard to take the Lord off the agenda, to eradicate his influence, to nullify his Word and his Church. And sometimes it can seem as though they might succeed.

But we need to remember that they never will. And that's why the Lord sent Elijah to cross paths with Obadiah. For even though the king and the nation had not yet repented, verse 1 tells us that the Lord sent Elijah with a message of rain, with a message of grace. And so after Obadiah expressed all his fears, in verse 15 "Elijah said, 'As the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today.'" And he did, and neither he nor Obadiah were harmed.

And so in these simple words Elijah reminded Obadiah that the Lord is Almighty, and so even when his presence is less obvious, he's still in control. He reminded Obadiah that God's not dead but surely alive, and so even in the hardest times there's no need to fear. He reminded Obadiah that the Lord will never abandon him, so he can keep on trusting no matter what.

But that's his message for us as well. Just like Obadiah and Elijah, we live in troubled times when our faith is under fire. And sometimes it can seem like the Lord has disappeared, that he's abandoned us, that he's dead. But he isn't. He sent his ultimate messenger 2000 years ago, his own Son with a message of mercy and grace. And when Jesus came he reminded us that God's still on the throne, still in control, still looking after his people. And the Lord's promised that Jesus will return, to set all things straight, to deal with sin, and make everything new.

And in the meantime, my sister, my brother, we too do not need to be afraid, no matter what this society throws at us. There will indeed be hard times, much harder than we've experienced so far. But yet we can be encouraged to know that our Lord loves us deeply, he cares for us constantly, he protects us unfailingly, right to that day when he will take us home.

So let me close with these assuring words from Hebrews 13, "God has said, Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. So we can say with confidence, The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." May this truth give us strength when our faith is under fire. Amen.